

# PROTECTING THE FORESTS FROM FIRE:

## A Brief History of Wildland Fire Protection In Alabama

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**T**o most people, the term “fire protection” probably conjures images of the operations of modern urban fire departments. But it must be recognized that early America was primarily rural; and today, many Alabamians still live in rural and suburban areas where fire protection is typically delivered through rural volunteer fire departments. Indeed, the origins of fire suppression in significant portions of rural America are linked with the development of forestry agencies and rural-based fire departments.

### Evolution of Wildland Fire Policy

Today’s rural and wildland fire protection is the result of devastating fires in our history, and the mechanisms and agencies developed to combat them. In 1871 a massive forest fire, part of a wide swath of fires which extended westward from Ohio, killed more than 1,500 people as it swept over Pestigo, Wisconsin. (Coincidentally, this disaster occurred on the same day as the Great Chicago Fire, which killed 300 people.) The next major rural fire complex after the Pestigo Fire was the “Big Blowup of 1910.” Eighty-five men died battling these fires, some of them because they panicked and committed suicide as the fire lines were overrun. In the end, about five million acres were burned.

In 1898, Gifford Pinchot, Chief of the Forestry Division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (this division became the U.S. Forest Service in 1905) catalogued more than five thousand forest fires to determine the danger to people and natural resources from wildland fires. This study convinced conservationists of the need for fire prevention and suppression, and also led many to believe that the use of fire for clearing land was destructive and should be eliminated. Even the burning of undergrowth in the South (which

had taken place for centuries) was likewise condemned.

Ultimately, the chief of the Forest Service would be led to declare fire prevention the best policy to protect America’s forests, and urged state cooperation so that all forestland would have adequate protection. Forest Service officials began to view fire prevention as a “mission” and requested more money to support their agency’s efforts. Congress responded to their requests by approving the Weeks Act in 1911. Section 2 of this law authorized federal matching funds for states with forest protection agencies that met federal standards. In 1924, Congress passed the Clark-McNary Act, encouraging closer federal, state, and private cooperation for fire control.

A series of fires in the Selway Mountains of Idaho in 1934 focused debate about wildland fire policy. A Forest Service review board outlined various possibilities for wildland fire policy, ranging from aggressive firefighting to total withdrawal from fire suppression in the backcountry. Public opinion, greatly shaped by two decades of Forest Service

policy, was opposed to a “let-burn policy.” The Forest Service would continue to advocate vigorous fire suppression and prevention until the 1970s, and would take the lead in federal forest fire suppression efforts.

In 1965, the U.S. government established the Boise Interagency Fire Center to coordinate the three federal agencies that would be engaged in wildland fire suppression: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Forest Service, and what was then known as the Weather Bureau (today’s National Weather Service). The Bureau of Indian Affairs, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were added later, and the name was changed to the National Interagency Fire Center.

The debate about policy intensified as a result of on-going research, initiated as early as the 1940s. The research indicated that properly applied, fire benefited longleaf pine forests in the South. A few foresters had been suggesting that controlled “light burns” in southern landscapes had a positive role, but their

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Photo by Jeff Carr

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opinions had often been suppressed. Some boldly argued in favor of letting many naturally-caused backcountry fires simply burn themselves out.

Forests that had not been allowed to burn under the previous fire suppression policy had become diseased and were dying, making the forests susceptible to catastrophic fires. The exclusion of fire had allowed the continued accumulation of fuels, and fire-intolerant species functioned as “ladders” enabling flames to climb from the forest floor to the crowns of mature trees. This led to hotter catastrophic fires which also damaged soils, caused erosion, and endangered human communities.

In 1968, the National Park Service began advocating ecosystem management by restoring fire to the landscape. The Forest Service modified its policies and adopted a program similar to that of the Park Service. Beginning in 1978, natural fires were allowed to burn in wilderness sites, and controlled burning was permitted in order to reduce fuels and improve habitat.

The now famous Yellowstone Fires of 1988 as well as catastrophic wildfires which occurred in 1994 – that killed thirty-four firefighters, burned two million acres of forest, and consumed \$965 million in emergency fire funds – may have been enhanced by the accumulated forest fuels resulting from a hard-line “no burn” policy. A revised fire control policy employing prescribed burning and non-suppression of “natural” fires would now come to be more readily accepted by the public.

Utilizing fire prevention methods such as prescribed or controlled burns contain risks to people and natural resources as well. “Controlled” burns sometimes get out of control, such as the one set by the National Park Service near Los Alamos, New Mexico, which eventually burned nearly forty-seven thousand acres in May 2000. However, these risks pale in comparison to the damages and dangers associated with wildfires.

The wildland fire situation remains as critical as ever. Since 1900, over 700 people have died on wildfires in America, of which the vast majority of



Photo by Gib Burke

them had been employed or volunteered to fight the fires. In 2000, a disastrous fire season produced 85,000 wildfires which burned nearly seven million acres. These fires resulted in the death of sixteen people, and fire suppression costs were also in excess of one billion dollars.

## Origins of The Alabama Forestry Commission

In 1907, John Wallace, a state representative from Madison County, was instrumental in establishing the first Forestry Commission. This commission was a natural outgrowth of a growing demand for forest and wildlife protection in Alabama. The law which created the commission authorized the counties of the state to appropriate a sum not to exceed \$250 annually to pay for forest protection, and directed that all money collected from penalties for “firing the woods without five days notice to adjacent landowners” be placed in a forest reserve fund. Wallace reported in the yearly Commission Report in 1908 that the new Forestry Commission had made progress toward discouraging annual burning of forested lands. The commission suffered from a lack of funds, which seriously limited its effectiveness.

In September 1922, I.T. Quinn, Alabama’s Commissioner of Game and Fish, headed a statewide conservation congress in which the attendees made

recommendations for new state conservation laws. This group recommended that, “the Legislature of Alabama be called upon to enact such laws as necessary for the protection, conservation, and perpetuation of our forests.” This effort led the legislature to establish a new State Commission of Forestry that began with the passage of the Forestry Act of 1923. Additionally, the law provided for all law enforcement officers of Alabama to be declared “forest wardens” and to report all violations of state law to local district attorneys.

In the 1930s, the State Commission of Forestry, in cooperation with the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service, secured the assistance of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) for constructing fire control improvements. Ultimately, the state forestry program would benefit from the construction of 49 “fire towers” which provided for detection of forest fires, until airplanes began to be utilized for this purpose approximately 30 years ago.

The Acts of Alabama of 1939 contained several provisions affecting the ability of the state commission to do its work. The Commission was directed to establish and designate forest protection areas, and county commissions were to levy a tax to be placed in a “forest protection fund” and expended by the Forestry Commission for forest fire pro-



tection. Additionally, all forest law enforcement officers appointed by the state forester were given statewide jurisdiction and allowed to enter on any lands and to “do any and all necessary work” to suppress and prevent forest fires.

The State Commission of Forestry managed the state parks until 1939 when the Alabama Department of Conservation was created. Following the enactment of the Department of Conservation Act of 1939, a Division of State Parks, Monuments, and Historic Sites was created. The forestry program was placed in the newly created Division of Forestry of the Department of Conservation.

The calendar year 1950 marked an important time in the history of organized fire protection in Alabama. For the first time, Alabama was able to provide statewide protection for the 18 million acres of forestland in state and private ownership. In that year, there were 9,947 fires which burned a total of 415,000 acres, or 2.3% of the protected area. This was a significant drop in the number of fires on lands that had previously been unprotected.

In 1955, Alabama authorized the governor on behalf of the state to join the Southeastern Interstate Forest Fire Protection Compact. The Compact’s purpose was “to promote effective prevention and control of forest fires in the southeast region by the development of integrated fire plans, the maintenance of adequate forest fire fighting services by the member states, and to provide mutual aid in fighting forest fires among the compacting states of the region.” Alabama has supplied firefighters to other states and to the U.S. Forest Service on several occasions to participate in fire suppression on multi-jurisdiction wildfires.

The Division of Forestry was removed from the Alabama Department of Conservation, and the Alabama Forestry Commission was created in 1969 to take all reasonable and practicable measures to prevent and suppress forest fires. Since 1980, the Alabama Forestry Commission has provided a mechanism whereby counties are able to obtain assistance for the establishment and management of

volunteer fire departments, thus providing statewide fire protection for rural lands and unincorporated areas of Alabama.

## The Fire Threat Today

Although great strides have been made in regard to wildland fire suppression in the South, the threat of wildfire is



Photo by Jim Wade

very real today. In fact, the thirteen southern states lead the nation in the number of wildfires, averaging about 45,000 fires each year. Approximately 93% of these wildland fires are the result of the actions of people rather than natural causes. The fires that threaten our lives and property are likely the result of where we live and how we live in the South today.

Since the 1970s, a pattern of migration of Americans took place away from urban areas toward suburban or rural areas. This type of migration has occurred in Alabama as well, resulting in areas being developed in such a way that more homes are located where the fuels feeding a wildfire change from natural (wildland) to man-made (urban) fuel. This expansion in the number of homes being built in suburban and rural areas has seriously complicated the duties of

both urban and wildland firefighters in several ways: by increasing the frequency and severity of fires, by making the traditional firefighting tactics such as prescribed fire and plowed firebreaks more difficult to employ, and by logistical difficulties required by a multi-jurisdictional fire attack. This wildland-urban interface problem is largely responsible for the destruction of more than 1,400 homes and the loss of 44 lives in the 1985 California wildfires.

State agencies are responsible for wildland suppression on 94% of the South’s 214 million acres of land. The greatest portion of this land is owned by private landowners. With the rapid growth of suburban communities in recent years, state forestry agencies are greatly concerned with the potential for catastrophic wildland fires. Additionally, these agencies would likely be overwhelmed in their attempted response to these fires when they occur. Homeowners must increasingly accept some responsibility for taking actions to protect their homes before a wildfire occurs. For this reason, the Alabama Forestry Commission currently participates in a program called “Firewise,” a cooperative effort among federal, state, and private agencies which enables landowners to plan and execute fire prevention in the wildland-urban interface. 🏠

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